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T H E

# Old and New Testament Student

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WHAT a constant temptation there is to forget that the Bible is everywhere a book of life. How much of it is a record of veritable history—the history of living men and women. Every part of it is in direct connection with human life, in touch with human interests and activities. But the tendency to ignore this fact is ever present. With the unlearned, to whom there would seem every reason for taking it as a message to living men with plain teaching for the common humanity, a constant desire dominates to find hidden and fantastical meanings in the Word. If they can get hold of a mystical sense, they imagine that they are glorifying the Scripture. If some extreme or obscure point of doctrine or practice lurks in the recesses of a biblical writing, they pounce upon it and, separating it from the life in which it lived in due subordination to other truth and to which it owed its importance, they exalt it, develop it, worship it, though in their removal of it from its place they have put it to death. The history of the church is full of such examples.

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BUT is the temptation thus to abstract—if the expression may be used—and to ossify Scripture confined to the unlearned? By no means. Far more culpable in this matter are the learned doctors of the church. They, indeed, have set the standard to which the rank and file must needs attain. The many are in direct contact with present life and are therefore by the very nature of their position called and compelled to apply the Scriptures to real life and understand them as Living Oracles in the true sense of that phrase. But the student, separated, in many respects, from the world's struggle, is

liable to look upon the Bible as a thing apart, a library for classification, a subject for abstract discussion. It is to him a book of theology. Its doctrines are all-important; their setting and surroundings comparatively unimportant. Thus it is forgotten that in the Bible the very form which a doctrine assumes is dependent upon the man who utters it, the people to whom it is spoken, the age of the world, the land and the very atmosphere where it first appeared. The scholar will build his system on texts, torn from their connection and interpreted apart from that life, of which they formed a part and to which they contribute, in their own place, a share of that impulse, which went there, and was ever intended to go, to influence human hearts somewhere in the great world. But those texts had their very reason for existence, in that life and that impulse upon actual human beings. The moment they are isolated, they wither. The moment they are made independent, that moment they shrivel into unrecognizable bareness. How clearly is the fact illustrated in the study of Paul's Epistles. The books will tell you that the usual division of the most of these writings is into a doctrinal part and a moral or practical part. St Paul, the conception is, sat down and first proceeded to write a careful, scholarly, systematic treatise on some point or points in the Christian Theology and, then, having finished it, proceeded, in a few concluding chapters, to impress a few practical truths based upon this systematic Theology. Is not this a fair statement of the essential conception on which said commentaries are written? Of course it is. But is the conception true to fact? It is the farthest from it. Paul's Epistle to the Romans which the scholars have regarded as a kind of system of theology closing with hortatory remarks connected with the preceding abstract of truth by a "therefore"—is as unsystematic a letter as ever was penned. It throbs with life—not theological life merely or primarily, but with human life. It came from a great human heart and was meant not for wise heads in the nineteenth century but for plain Christians with eager loving hearts in the first ages. Were they supernaturally enlightened in these early ages so as to understand these great thoughts over which we stumble? No, they read

those glowing words with the heart. If we drew near to these biblical writings with the constant and conscious purpose to understand them as *words of life* in the sense in which they were originally such, we would not so often blunder ourselves or lead others astray in their interpretation.

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THE IDEA of God which appears in the Hebrew prophetic writings is, excepting one other, the sublimest conception ever given to the world. The fundamental element in that idea is ethical. God is supremely holy. He hates iniquity, loves truth, makes for righteousness. This is the great teaching of the prophets. Thus to make God known to the nation they lived and worked. For this conception some were willing even to die, and in their dying glorified the Name for which they gave their lives. Grant for the moment the absurd position that the conception, however sublime, has no foundation in fact, that there never was nor is such a God or a God at all. Even in that case their ideal was worth believing. If they made it, it, likewise, and in a far more real way, made them. The glory of Isaiah, of Jeremiah, of Hosea, and of all that immortal band is that they believed in Jehovah, God of Righteousness. Were they great intellects? Were their hearts warm with love for humanity and desires for the welfare of their nation? Were they men of profound insight and of remarkable powers in bringing things to pass? All these elements of character were evolved, ennobled, transfigured by their faith in Him, the Holy One, the God of Love and Truth. They became men of truth, of righteousness, of love. To adapt a noble saying of St. Augustine, they joined themselves to the Eternal God and thereby have themselves become eternal in their beneficent influence, in the reverent regard of humanity. They rose to new and nobler conceptions of their nation's God and those conceptions transformed them into new and nobler characters.

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IN THIS connection it is worth remembering that the prophets were not only preachers of present truth but taught

as well by the lessons of the past. They were the writers of the Hebrew History which we possess, history which is not strictly history, because they wrote it with a religious end in view. About the character and trustworthiness of this historical matter many questions are to-day being started. Is there anything historical about any or all of it? Was it all romancing? Did the idea produce the narrative? How far do the idea and purpose color and shape the narrative? These questions are fundamental. They must be answered. The present line of suggestion has quite a near relation to them. The argument is this. If the prophetic idea of God is ethically so exalted, if that idea is fundamental in the Hebrew prophet, if it profoundly influenced his personal life, it must have had its influence upon him as an historian. Could a man, deeply reverencing the righteous Jehovah, the God of Truth, proceed to palm off false narratives upon his readers as genuine history? The thing is psychologically impossible. A theory of Israelitish history involving that fundamental contradiction is absurd. What is to be concluded, then, as to the trustworthiness of the records and the representations which these prophets have transmitted to us, from the point of view of their sincere and profound belief in the prophetic ideal of God? Two conclusions seem self-evident. First, their historical writings would be permeated and moulded by a strong ethical and religious spirit. Second, they would present to us material which is fundamentally true to fact, germinally historical. These two characteristics are, indeed, what we do find to be the chief elements of the prophetic histories, namely an historical basis, idealized by the deep religious consciousness of a man, who worshipped and preached a righteous God, supremely loving and desiring truth.

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THE New Testament writers, indeed the biblical writers as a whole, manifest, among other shining qualities, one, for which credit is seldom given them. At least only indirectly are they praised for possessing it. It is a very homely quality with a very homely name. It is *common sense*. Really, you say, we never thought of such a thing as charac-

teristic of the Bible. But is it not true? And if you have the highest regard for common sense in practical life, will you not equally admire its presence in the Book of books? How many foolish things these writers might have written. How many opportunities they might have given us for misunderstanding, how many precedents for actions which would prove injurious to personal or associated religious life—if here or there they had not exercised the reserve or manifested the simple wisdom which is so characteristic a feature of the Scriptures. Here is indeed one of the most unique of the Bible's qualities. Common sense is an occidental virtue, belonging we think, peculiarly to the Anglo-saxon. One would feel some incongruity in applying such a term to an Oriental. Yet this most oriental of books is in this respect most occidental. Remember that the occasional words and suggestions or temporary practices of these Bible men have, by the devout, been seized upon and without regard to their historical connection or temporary character, have been made of permanent significance. They have been enshrined in dogmas and perpetuated in institutions. And yet these incidental things of Scripture, thus made lasting in Christian life, have on the whole worked no injury and in many cases been of wonderful benefit. Why is this? Who of us would not shrink from the thought that some such chance remark or unconsciously performed act on our part might in future time become the treasured possession of generations to come and the basis of their action? We would doubt mightily the ultimate helpfulness of such of our deeds and words. But just this thing has happened in the case of these Bible men—and, indeed, who would have it otherwise? But the question again comes, How do you explain it? Simply this; they were men of preëminent *common sense*. It is on this account that a great denomination of the Christian Church is to-day searching to know the mind of an Apostle who in the first century made some suggestions concerning the conduct of women in public worship in one of the little churches of Christ planted at Corinth. Men are not going to perpetuate a foolish custom even if an Apostle himself advised it. If the Bible were full of suggestions about practical things which might be theoret-

ically beautiful, but are practically unworkable or tend toward injury, all the fine theory would not save it from neglect and rejection. But the opposite is everywhere true. The practical good sense of these Scriptures is one of their most striking features. It makes very useful and important the exact understanding of what may have been a temporary and incidental piece of advice to an obscure church in Greece in the first century. It has made so generally beneficent the adoption of even temporary suggestions in biblical writings as permanent bases of action by the church at large. It will, in coming years, with the growing acceptance of the historical method of Bible study, make yet more fruitful those parts of the Scripture which, hitherto, may have been generally accepted as intended only for the place and time of their first writing. Practical good sense—the Bible is full of it. And how comes it? We are not ashamed to say; we ought to be proud to point to it and say—if they were inspired in any sense, these writers were inspired in *common sense*.